

Four Rivers Association Newsletter
31426 Gonzaga Road
Santa Nella, CA 95322-9737
Spring 2007

Greetings 4 Rivers Association Members;

Even though we have all been suffering through an uncharacteristically cold winter in the Central Valley, spring is right around the corner and it is time to start thinking about all the great opportunities there will be to get outside and enjoy nature and the outdoors at our State Parks and wildlife refuges. With this newsletter we hope to inspire you.

First, we hope you will enjoy a contribution from Four Rivers Association Board Member and local botanist, Bob Edminster as he whets our appetites for spring and glorious wildflower displays with, "Our Very Own Orchid."

Our Very Own Orchid

Robert Edminster

According to the NEW JEPSON MANUAL, the orchid family, Orchidaceae, contains about 800 genera and 18,000 species worldwide. One of the largest families in the world of plants, orchids are said to prefer tropical climates and are found throughout the world except in the deserts. They are a favorite of plant breeders who have developed hundreds of varieties as garden or hothouse ornamentals. Wild orchids are common in New Zealand and Australia. In only two days in 1989, a local botanist introduced us to 24 species of wild orchids in the Eucalyptus forests along the southwest Australian coast. In California, wild orchids favor coastal locations and high mountains. Thirteen species of wild orchids were recorded during plant studies in the high Sierra Nevada.

Of the several hundred species of plants cataloged on the RANCHO SAN LUIS GONZAGA, now named Pacheco State Park, during studies conducted in the mid 1990s, many unique plants were found. An orchid in our dry hills, however, was neither found nor expected.

When David Milam, then the Pacheco Park supervising ranger, called in May of 2003 to tell me that he had found an orchid in the park, my answer was "David, you know there are no orchids in this dry country." His answer was "Better come and take a look." I was there that same afternoon and sure enough, after a trip into the back country on the park's mule and a slow walk into a steep canyon on my creaky legs, there was a small but significant population of Michael's Piperia, *Piperia michaelii*. After a bit of thought it occurred to me why a coast-loving plant could be found in Pacheco State Park.

At the San Luis Gonzaga a combination of geographic and climatic factors combine to form a habitat of great diversity. The indentation of Monterey Bay reaches to within less than 50 miles of Pacheco Pass. This relative proximity to the sea combined with the natural wind-gap between the Santa Cruz and Gabilan Ranges near the coast, and the low elevation of the central portion of the Diablo Range, provides an open avenue for coastal fog. Summer pressure gradients between the sea and the hot Central Valley often create strong westerly winds bringing with them an unusual flow of wet coastal fog. Damp coastal air and the cooling effect of coastal fog combine to produce cold wet conditions on the western part of the San Luis Gonzaga even during the hot months of July and August. Often, during hot summer days, a 30-40 degree temperature gradient exists between the Pacheco Pass divide and the dry valley only a few miles to the east.

Although not producing colorful flowers, Michael's Piperia is, indeed, a spectacular plant, its long stalk of many green colored flowers is not duplicated by any other plant in the Four Rivers District.

If you would like to experience more of Bob Edminster's knowledge and lore about Central Valley flora, please join us at this year's Four Rivers Association members meeting, at which Bob will be speaking and presenting a slide show on the subject. Read about that next.

FOUR RIVERS ASSOCIATION MEMBERS MEETING & POT LUCK SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 25TH

The public is invited to the annual Members Meeting and Pot Luck of the Four Rivers Association. The Four Rivers Association is a local nature organization, the mission of which, is to promote and support the educational activities of our local state parks, as well as to help conserve our local wild areas for the benefit of the public. The organization will be holding it's Meeting and Pot Luck on Sunday, February 25th, at noon, at San Luis Reservoir SRA Headquarters – 31426 Gonzaga Road.

The pot luck luncheon starts at noon, and beverages, plates, and utensils will be provided by the Association.

At 1 p.m. there will be an interesting presentation titled "Flowers of the Foothills Part 2" by our colorful local expert Bob Edminster. Mr. Edminster brings with him more than six decades of botanical experience and has selected scores of gorgeous flower photos from his collection of more than 1,000 to show with his talk. He is known for his fascinating anecdotes and stories, in addition to his wealth of historical and botanical knowledge. (Last year he presented Part 1.)

This annual meeting is free to the public – just bring a lunch dish to share.

The Four River Association invites everyone to join the Association, and in so doing, contribute to the support of the educational activities provided at our local State Parks and State Recreational Areas. It only costs \$6 per individual or \$10 per family. Membership includes one “Day Use Parking Pass” at a local state park – a \$6 value; 10% off postcards, maps, and flower seeds at Romero Visitor Center (next to San Luis Reservoir); a membership card; and E-mail Newsletters for the Association including notices of local state park special events.

San Luis Reservoir Headquarters is located at 31426 Gonzaga Road, next to the San Luis Reservoir Dam. Take the Basalt Exit, south, from Highway 152, and then turn right, onto Gonzaga Road. (It is between Highway 33 and the San Luis Creek Exit – which is on the north side of Highway 152.)

There will be park rangers and naturalists at the meeting as well, so bring your curiosity and questions. Everyone is encouraged to join other nature lovers at this meeting to learn about all the beautiful wild places there are to visit around the Los Banos area. Seeing all the terrific wildflower photos will help us look forward to spring and get ready for the annual wildflower hikes offered at Pacheco State Park. Read about them next.

For more information, please call Jennifer Morgan at 209-826-1196 ext. 222 [or try 209-826-1197], or e-mail her at jmorg@parks.ca.gov .

Pacheco State Park

SPRING WILDFLOWER and OLD ADOBE HIKES

Every Saturday & Sunday (except Easter Sunday) in April
Wildflower Hikes: 10 a.m. to noon --- Old Adobe Hikes: noon to 1 p.m.

WILDFLOWER DAYS Celebration

Help celebrate Pacheco State Park’s 10th Anniversary with a delightful springtime hike. Join park naturalist Jennifer Morgan to view this year’s lovely wildflower display overlooking San Luis Reservoir. Jennifer will discuss the Native American and pioneer uses of plants and rich history of Pacheco Pass. The hike is about two miles long and is classed as moderate.

A NEW HISTORICAL HIKE

Denis Poole, the ranger at Pacheco State Park is pleased to announce an additional springtime hike, which will be offered in concert with our usual naturalist-led wildflower hikes. Ranger Poole will take visitors on a one-hour,

one-mile round-trip walk to view the seldom-visited remaining structure of the first adobe house built in Merced County, as well as an original Miller and Lux line shack from the 1800's and the Pacheco family horse ranch. Along the way, he will discuss the history of Pacheco State Park, Rancho San Luis Gonzaga, wind mills, and the energy producing wind turbines located on the property.

Visitors may elect to take Jennifer's two-mile hike at 10 a.m. and then immediately join Ranger Poole, or they can just be ready at noon for his hike, which is shorter and much less strenuous.

No advance reservations are necessary for groups less than 10 people, except on April. 1st.

For all hikes, be sure to bring waterproof hiking footwear, layered clothing and hat, sunscreen, and water. (Optional depending on weather conditions are rain gear; also binoculars, camera, and field guides.) If you bring a lunch, you may join Jennifer in the picnic area after the first hike.

Please note: the only cost to participants is the Park Day Use Fee of \$5 per car. For more information, call Jennifer Morgan at 209-826-1196 ext.222 or Ranger Poole at 209-826-6283.

DIRECTIONS to Pacheco State Park – the park is located 18 miles west of Los Banos and 20 miles east of Gilroy on "Dinosaur Point" Road off of Highway 152. Turn south onto Dinosaur Point Road and take the first right, through the park gate.

Path of the Padres Hikes

The staff at San Luis Reservoir State Recreation Area will again be leading the popular "Path of the Padres" hikes on most Saturdays and Sundays starting March 3rd, and continuing until April 29th. These hikes are open to the public, ages 6 years and older, by advance reservation only. School group hikes may be arranged for Thursdays or Fridays. General public reservations open the first Monday in February: February 5th, 2007.

The hike begins at the Los Banos Creek Reservoir boat launch ramp at 8 a.m. and returns to the ramp about 3:30 p.m. A pontoon boat carries passengers for about 30 to 40 minutes to the west end of the reservoir. Along the way, short stops are made so the hikers can observe wildlife along the shoreline.

The group disembarks at the west end of the reservoir for a five mile round-trip hike. Here they see the area where, in the early 1800s, the Spanish padres from Mission San Juan Bautista camped on their way to the Central Valley. This hike is moderately strenuous and will take about five hours.

Participants must be in fairly good physical condition. Because Los Banos Creek is crossed several times during the hike, footwear may get wet. Layered clothing and sturdy footgear should be a priority. Hikers must carry their own lunch and a minimum of 2 quarts of water. The hike traverses country that can be very hot and dry, depending on weather conditions, so a hat and sunscreen are recommended.

Throughout the hike, the natural and historic features of the area are observed and discussed by the hike leader. The lunch stop is near the historic "baths," deep pools in the creek carved in bedrock, which gave Los Banos its name. As early as 1805 the mission padres and accompanying soldiers washed and rested here at Los Banos del Padre Arroyo, now simply Los Banos Creek.

Participants have the option of taking a side trip up a steep hill for a spectacular view of the Menjoulet Canyon and the proposed site of the Los Banos Grandes Reservoir. The canyon floor is covered with 576 acres of old-growth Sycamore forest, described by Department of Fish & Game biologists as the largest and most intact natural community of its kind left in California. Binoculars add greatly to enjoyment of the scene, and may help hikers spot falcons and eagles that may be seen in the area.

Reservations are required for this exciting series of hikes and will be accepted at the park office **starting on Monday February 5th, 2007**. To make a reservation, call 209-826-1196 Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m. A reservation fee of \$10.00 per person more than 13 years old, and \$7 per child aged 6 to 12 is required to confirm the telephone reservations. A family of five may reserve space for two adults and three children for \$25. Space is limited, so please book early. On the day of the hike, an additional day use parking fee of \$6.00 per car is charged upon entry. For more information please call 209-826-1196 (or 826-1197). All Path of the Padres hikers become members of the Four Rivers Association, the nonprofit organization that supports our local state parks. Four Rivers Association members will receive email newsletters about local outdoors events.

Spring is also for BIRDWATCHING

From now through May is a great time to get out into the parks and refuges to see many of the hundreds of species of birds that call the Central Valley home for at least part of the year.

Large numbers of Snow and Ross' geese and Lesser Sandhill Cranes should still be at Merced National Wildlife Refuge on Sandy Mush Road for another few weeks. There are still large numbers of other waterfowl species at all the refuges – Merced NWR on Sandy Mush Road, San Luis NWR on Wolfsen Road off Hwy.

165, West Bear Creek NWR on Hwy. 165 south of Hwy. 140, and the Los Banos State Wildlife Area on Henry Miller Road. Other locations provide great birdwatching opportunities, as well. Try the Basalt Camp Grounds on Gonzaga Road to catch warblers and other songbirds moving through during spring migration. The Medeiros State Recreation Area on the San Luis Reservoir Forebay is a great place to spot wintering waterfowl such as Mergansers, deep-water ducks, and occasionally, loons. So, take advantage of the spring migration and get out there to enjoy nature's jewels – the birds.